

Conclusion

The Cuban Missile Crisis of 1962 was a classic demonstration of the importance of naval forces in the modern international security environment. The Navy's ballistic missile submarine fleet, and the Air Force's land-based ballistic missile and bomber units, possessed overwhelming power for destruction. Not only were the Polaris submarines virtually invisible and invulnerable as they awaited launch orders under many fathoms of ocean water, but they could maneuver close to the enemy homeland before unleashing their terrible weapons. The existence and readiness of this strategic arsenal clearly helped President Kennedy dissuade the Soviets from brandishing their much weaker nuclear sword.

The strength and versatility of Admiral Dennison's Atlantic Fleet also lessened the chance that Khrushchev would mount a conventional challenge at sea. U.S. aircraft carriers, attack submarines, cruisers, destroyers, frigates, and shore-based patrol squadrons so dominated the waters of the Atlantic and the Caribbean that Soviet surface warships remained in their home waters. Furthermore, American and Canadian ASW forces kept Soviet submarines, the only real seaborne threat in 1962, under such close surveillance that hostile action on their part would have been suicidal.

In addition, the U.S. forces

under Admiral Dennison, the unified Commander in Chief, U.S. Atlantic Command, were clearly superior to Soviet and Cuban conventional forces in the Caribbean, and this fact undoubtedly influenced decision making in Moscow and Havana. Navy carriers loaded with fighter and attack aircraft, cruisers and destroyers bristling with 8-inch and 5-inch guns, and amphibious ships crowded with Marines and their weapons stood ready to bring war to the Cuban littoral. Reinforced by Navy ships and Air Force transport aircraft, Marine units already ashore at Guantanamo were prepared to support any invasion. And, no more than a few hundred miles away in southern Florida and other staging

areas in the American South, Army airborne, infantry, and armor divisions and Air Force air defense and tactical combat wings were poised.

The president found U.S. naval forces valuable not only for deterring nuclear or conventional conflict, but for enabling him to manage a crisis without resorting to aggression. The fleet's presence on the seaward approaches to Cuba allowed him to place the onus of any military escalation on Khrushchev. Kennedy did not need the permission of any multinational organization or single nation to deploy these forces. The strength and effectiveness of the U.S. naval quarantine, however, made it militarily and politically acceptable for member states of the OAS to join the effort.

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Adm. Robert L. Dennison awards Lt. (jg) William L. Taylor, a VFP-62 pilot, the Distinguished Flying Cross for his execution of low-level reconnaissance flights over Cuba. Taylor and his comrades in the Navy's aviation squadrons demonstrated great bravery and professional skill in their missions, which were critical to the successful resolution of the Cuban Missile Crisis of 1962.

Freedom of the sea also allowed Canadian and British naval units to take part in the surveillance effort without negotiating a political agreement. Moreover, the fleet was able to remain on station—*Independence* operated for 54 days at sea—because of continuous replenishment by naval logistic ships. This capability made it possible for the president to mount and maintain the de facto blockade of Cuba.

Intelligence collection, including that done by the Navy, proved to be another vital resource for the president in his management of the Cuban Missile Crisis. Satellites and U-2 aircraft helped

assure Kennedy that the United States had a decided edge over the Soviet Union in terms of nuclear weapons. CIA and Air Force U-2s unmasked Khrushchev's ploy to establish Cuba as a launching pad for medium and intermediate-range missiles and bombers. Low-level reconnaissance planes, especially the Navy's first-rate units, supplied the EXCOM with critical intelligence on Soviet and Cuban combat forces and defenses on the island. They also monitored the dismantling, transportation to ports, and loading onto merchantmen of the worrisome MRBMs and Il-28 bombers. Finally, Navy long-range

patrol squadrons and surface ships enabled Washington to verify Soviet compliance with the terms of the Kennedy-Khrushchev understanding that resolved this most terrifying crisis of the Cold War.

The president and the nation were grateful for the Navy's contribution to the peaceful resolution of the Cuban Missile Crisis. The sailors and aircrewmembers of over 250 warships, aviation squadrons, and support units earned the Armed Forces Expeditionary Medal. As Admiral Anderson promised, the Navy did not let the president down.

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Suggested Readings

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